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## Creating an Engaged Community within the Library

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## Creating an Engaged Community within the Library

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*This article is from the October 2016 issue.*

By Kathy A. Parsons

### Introduction

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The Iowa State University (ISU) Library began a self-examination and rebuilding process under the guidance of the interim dean in the late summer of 2014. Library staff met with cultural consultants who helped us to understand who we are, what we have in common, what makes us different, and where we can make improvements. Since then, we have started to create a culture of transparency, tolerance, and unity. In the Library's recently revised Five Year Strategic Plan, there is a section called "A Superior Staff Experience." Under this category are two goals of "Agile Organizational Structure" and "Healthy Culture." Inherent in these goals is the ideal of a community of library employees who have a shared vision, a set of common goals, and mutual respect for each other. One way that libraries can create this sense of community would be to provide opportunities to learn about each employee from a work perspective and a personal perspective. The ISU Library has several ways that staff can gather and share interests and information about themselves. Some of our activities have been around for decades such as the Library Staff Association and Librarian Assembly (former Library Faculty). Other activities are new including Board Game Lunches, SpeedShare, and Summer Stretch Camp. Some activities have ceased only to return again in slightly different forms such as Strategic Planning Groups, Ides of Craft and Journal Club. Still others existed and disappeared as interest waned as in the case of the Library's Book Club and Jigsaw Puzzling. All of these activities have one common goal of creating an engaged community within the library.

### Community Building Activities

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#### Library Assembly

A long-standing community group recently changed names from Library Faculty to Librarian Assembly. This name change reflected a change in classification of newly hired librarians. Currently, the ISU Library has both library faculty and academic librarians. Therefore, this group represents both types of employees. During the academic year, Library Assembly meets monthly to discuss issues related to librarians such as promotion and evaluation process, travel and research, scholarly communications, and university-wide topics. Several times a year, special speakers such as the various academic deans have addressed the group.

#### Library Staff Association

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The Library Staff Association (LSA), created in 1968, is the library's official staff association. Membership in the LSA is open to all staff, students, and library retirees with a payment of nominal dues. LSA Council is comprised of divisional representation and the officers are elected by the members of the association. Some of the activities of the LSA include the annual ice cream social, annual summer picnic, end of the semester appreciation buffets, and food pantry and toy drives. LSA provides courtesy cards for members' life events and organizes retirement parties for library workers. LSA, also, at its general meetings will have speakers on various topics. LSA has brought such speakers as the coaches from the university athlete teams, scientists to talk about insects and the ash tree borer infestation, survivor of the Japanese Internment Camps during WWII, and many others.

#### Strategic Planning Groups

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In the fall of 2014, three teams were created to draft the library's new strategic plan with a facilitator from outside library but not the university. These teams were charged with crafting a new strategic plan would move us forward over the next five years. While, in the past, we have had groups of library staff working on strategic planning, these groups were constrained by guidelines from the upper administration. These latest group did not have any preconceived framework or the structure for the plan nor the content of the plan as in the past. Also, the groups were carefully formed to have representation across library staff, years of experience, and units. Additionally, the facilitator was not a member of the library staff and did not have a heavy invested concept of what we needed. Each group met separately and drafted its own plans. A smaller group comprised of members of each of the groups merged the three distinct plans into a single cohesive document. At all stages, the work was shared with the library staff for their review and input. The new plan was crafted from the bottom up in the library hierarchy and reflected the changing academic library climate and our improving library cultural.

#### Ides of Crafts

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At lunch time on the 15th of the month, a crafting lunch was started for staff to work and share their crafting skills. Depending on the month, the Ides of Craft may occur on the 14th or 16th of the month. Several years ago a group of staff members tried a lunch knitting group but the interest waned and the group disbanded. Hopefully, with a broader focus on more crafts the interest and participation level will stay high. The idea of this lunch activity started when a staff person commented to another who was knitting that they needed a push to complete a project. These two persons thought a regular scheduled craft time could be that motivation. The participants are learning from each other about our crafts, sharing our skills with others, and creating a community of staff with similar interests. So far, the group has been working on knitting socks, beading a bracelet and necklace, embroidering a design, knitting a shawl, and even adult coloring.

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## Journal Club

The Library's librarians have resurrected an older activity which was called "Tea and Conversation." At this former monthly meeting, librarians gathered for tea, desserts, and conversation about a library-related article. The updated version is now just a monthly conversation hour about a commonly read article. The moderator places a call for articles or papers to be discussed. If more than one is submitted the librarians select the winning article. The person who submits the selected article becomes the leader for that month's discussion. The librarians who attend this activity find it a good way to stay abreast of library related literature in the field and to learn about new developments in librarianship.

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## Board Game Lunch Hour

Board game lunch hour was implemented as the newest community building activity being spearheaded by a new librarian. Interested staff have brought in board games that can be played in under an hour. These games have included word games, seek and find pictures games, strategy games, and cards. Some staff members have set up games as a demonstration of longer and more complicated games during this lunch time. These board games lunches are scheduled every other week.

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## SpeedShare

The ISU Library hosted a staff speed sharing event. The event was modeled after the staff work-sharing program implemented at the University of Michigan Library. The event operates like speed dating where pairs of staff members talked with each other about their daily jobs tasks for five minutes each. After 10 minutes, the staff member moved to the next person and the process continued until everyone had shared their work story with every participant. Staff who were not partaking in the speed share were encouraged to attend, observe, and listen. A lunch reception was held after the event and many conversations that started during the speed sharing continued over lunch. This fun unique networking event was well received and will make a return appearance.

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## Summer Stretch Camp

This new self-directed staff development opportunity was adapted from the Learning 2.0 program developed by the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (N.C.). This summer camp allowed staff to play, experiment, and learn about new products and tools such as Pinterest, Tumblr, WordPress, and many others. Over the 10 weeks of camp library staff investigated different categories of products each week and completed an assignment to earn a badge for that week. The assignment was very simple to complete; one just tried a product for that week and posted a blog entry about their experience with the product. Each week, interested staff gathered for camp craft time to share experiences, ask for advice from others, learn from each other, and receive their badges. This summer camp was well received and staff enjoyed the opportunity to interact with staff from other areas of the library.

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## Healthy Workplace Group

This group was recently formed as a part of the Library's Five Year Strategic Plan to support a healthy work culture. The group has been brainstorming different activities that would meet this goal. The group has sent a survey to the library staff to gauge interest in several types of activities. The group will use the requests to plan activities for the year. In the meantime, the group has sponsored a before renovations tour of the library storage building and will conduct another one post renovations. As a way to reduce stress and to create a healthier brain, the group created an adult coloring box that is located in the staff lounge.

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## Summary

These activities have been helping the ISU employees to reach out to each other and to create a more cohesive workplace. We are on our way to meeting one of our strategic goals of an agile organization and a healthy culture.

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